



U.S. Immigration
and Customs
Enforcement

June 7, 2005

News Release

SAN DIEGO AREA GANG MEMBERS ARRESTED IN INTERNATIONAL DRUG TRAFFICKING AND MONEY LAUNDERING STING

SAN DIEGO – Following a two-year investigation, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents, working closely with the North County Regional Gang Task Force, have broken up a sophisticated international drug trafficking organization suspected of distributing methamphetamine, cocaine, and marijuana throughout the United States.

As a result of the probe, 33 individuals, including several high-ranking members of a local street gang, were charged today in federal court with multiple counts of drug trafficking and money laundering. Yesterday, 28 of those subjects were arrested during a pre-dawn operation in northern San Diego County.

The investigation, which began in April 2003, was initiated after agents learned about the drug distribution activities of the Rodriguez Drug Trafficking Organization, allegedly led by Juan Rodriguez. Rodriguez came to the attention of law enforcement agents because of his prominent role as a member of the Encinitas Home Boys Street Gang.

In recent years, agents believe Rodriguez's organization distributed significant quantities of methamphetamine, cocaine, and marijuana throughout the United States, with distribution points in Florida, Hawaii, Nevada, Illinois, Wisconsin, Alabama, and Oklahoma.

The Rodriguez organization allegedly used a stash house in Vista, California to store drugs after they were illegally imported into the United States from Mexico through the ports along the California/Mexico border. The drugs were then distributed nationwide using commercial parcel services, the U.S. mail, and vehicles equipped with secret compartments.

"These individuals are members of a well-entrenched local street gang that maintained an international drug trafficking network that reached across the nation," said Michael Unzueta, special agent-in-charge for ICE investigations in San Diego. "Gangs that profit from narcotics trafficking are a double blight on our neighborhoods and we are determined to dismantle their organizations."

Several of those arrested allegedly served as supply sources for Rodriguez's organization, including Jose Concepcion Meza, of Perris, Martin Becerra-Amezquita of El Cajon, and Sammy Meraz-Valenzuela of Escondido. It is suspected the ring supplied large quantities of drugs to distribution cells headed by Francisco Baldera, Jr. and Juan Ochoa, both of whom have ties to street gangs in the northern San Diego County.

Also arrested on charges of conspiracy to import and distribute controlled substances and laundering drug proceeds are: Norvell Martens, Don King, Gwyneth Powell, Terry Vilsack, Enrique Camacho, Ericka Salazar, Monica Ochoa, Belem Rodriguez, Maria Luisa Rocha, Jesus Rodriguez, Efren Balderas, Jose Lara, Scott Rutherford, and German Lopez. At the time of Monday's operation, six of those indicted were already in custody on related charges.

As a result of search warrants served during the operation, agents seized marijuana, cocaine, methamphetamine, 22 firearms, assorted ammunition, and \$70,000 in cash. In addition, ICE agents also seized two homes, several vehicles, and a Winnebago.

ICE

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement was established in March 2003 as the largest investigative arm of the Department of Homeland Security. ICE is comprised of five integrated divisions that form a 21st century law enforcement agency with broad responsibilities for a number of key homeland security priorities.